An evaluation of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s strategy to scale research results

IDRC findings summary 2021

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scaling science

Southern Hemisphere
SUPPORTING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

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Contents

01. Introduction

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) invests in knowledge, innovation, and solutions to improve the lives of people in the developing world. IDRC's 2015–2020 strategic objective committed the Centre to 'invest in knowledge and innovation for large scale positive change'.

As IDRC prepared to enter a new 10-year strategic period, it commissioned OTT and Southern Hemisphere to evaluate implementation of the strategic objective to scale and what was achieved by those efforts.

This document summarises key findings and considerations for IDRC as the Centre implements its new strategic plan. The full report is available to read at: **bit.ly/IDRCscalingevaluation**

About the evaluation

The evaluation had a summative and learning purpose, with the following objectives:

- Assess the results of efforts to scale the impact of research for development.
- Provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of past and current programming to improve future scaling efforts.
- Consolidate learning from IDRC's experience to share with grantees and other research organisations as a contribution to the emerging 'science of scaling'.

The evaluation took the form of a strategic review and employed a mixed-methods design. It included four interconnected components: an organisational review, studies of grantee perceptions and IDRC's external position, and a series of thematic case studies. Data collection for the evaluation involved interviews, focus group discussions and surveys with IDRC staff, grantees and informants from other organisations. Findings from across the components are integrated into this summary and the full report.

Scaling Science

At the beginning of the 2015–2020 strategy period, there was no standard definition or approach for 'scaling up' or achieving 'large scale positive change' at IDRC. Over the five-year strategic period, senior leadership and programs have grappled with the notions of 'scale' and 'scaling' and approached the strategic objective in different ways.

Alongside this experimentation, IDRC launched the Scaling Science initiative designed to learn across programs and advance the organisation's understanding of scaling. It resulted in the publication of the book *Scaling Impact: Innovation for Public Good* (McLean & Gargani, 2019) and *The Scaling Playbook: A Practical Guide for Researchers* (Price-Kelly, van Haeran & McLean, 2020).

IDRC's Scaling Science approach focuses on scaling impact rather than actions. It includes creating new knowledge, applying it to a real-world challenge, and ensuring the solution aims for optimal impact. This is not necessarily about scaling up or out, because bigger outputs or more actions do not always lead to better impact. The four guiding principles for scaling impact that emerged from IDRC's Scaling Science initiative are:

Justification: scaling is a choice that must be justified based on a balance of evidence and values, and agreed to by key stakeholders.

Optimal scale: scaling produces a collection of impacts, and we must consider the trade-offs between them to determine the magnitude, sustainability, variety, and equity of impact at optimal scale.

Coordination: a high level of planning and adaptation is required for scaling impact in complex systems involving multiple stakeholders.

Dynamic evaluation: is needed to understand the multiple intended and unintended outcomes of scaling in a complex system.

The way scaling is understood in this evaluation is informed in part by the Scaling Science initiative. While we did not use the guiding principles as an evaluative framework because they were not available for use by IDRC programs for most of the 2015–2020 strategy timeframe, the evaluation built the principles into questions for the learning component. Based on the Scaling Science work and other approaches we found in IDRC's monitoring, evaluation and reporting activities, the evaluation developed a 'scaling pathway' conceptual framework.

The scaling pathway: a conceptual framework

Through the course of the evaluation, a conceptual framework for scaling research results at IDRC emerged (see Figure 1). It comprises two interconnected pathways: one focused on policy and the other on innovation, joined via an emerging third pathway related to system strengthening. The policy and innovation pathways[1] relate directly to the corporate scaling indicators adopted by IDRC and reflect the way many programs reported progress against the scaling objective.

The scaling pathway helps clarify the distinction between the supply and demand sides of scaling. The supply side (left hand side) refers to generation and translation of knowledge and innovation, while the demand side refers to use of the knowledge and innovation to support development outcomes at optimal scale.

It also makes a distinction between policy change or adoption of an innovation by primary intended users and policy change or adoption of an innovation beyond primary intended users at optimal scale (i.e., policy or innovation outcomes achieved through scaling the results achieved with primary intended users). A 'scaling mindset' is applied at all stages of the scaling pathway, so that even in the early stages of developing new knowledge or an innovation, the research team is thinking about and planning for impact at optimal scale. This is equivalent to what IDRC's Scaling Playbook describes as the need for continuous reflection on the four guiding principles before, during and after an innovation effort.

The scaling pathway differs from IDRC's program impact pathways that define expected outcomes in that the anticipated scaling pathways do not necessarily traverse from left to right. Projects can have different entry points and exit points along the scaling pathway and programs can invest at different points in the scaling pathway simultaneously.

[1] The Scaling Science approach defines 'policy' as one of five identified pathways to scale. Whereas, the scaling pathway distinguishes just two pathways 'innovation' and 'policy' reflecting the two high-level indicators used by IDRC to monitor the scaling objective. In this case innovation refers to products, technologies, or methodologies.

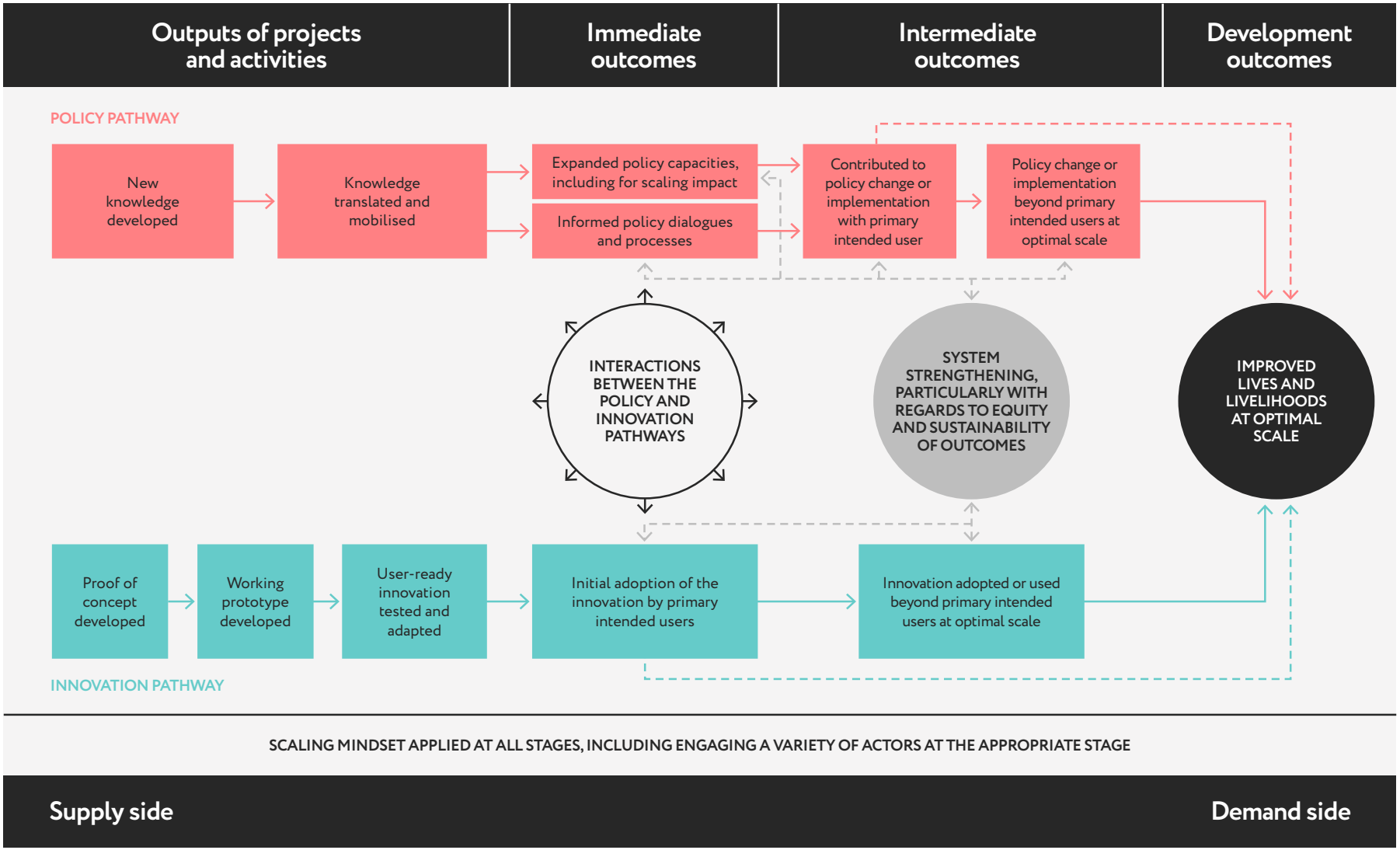


Figure 1: Scaling pathway (see evaluation report section 1.3 for a more detailed description)

02. Outcomes achieved

The evaluation looked for three types of **policy outcomes**, as defined by a framework used by IDRC's Policy and Evaluation division adapted from Carden (2009): (1) Expanded policy capacities of external actors, including for scaling, (2) Informed policy dialogues and decision-making processes, and (3) Contributions to policy implementation or change.

The evaluation used two types of **innovation outcomes**, drawing on a framework developed by a 2018 IDRC working group describing stages of innovation: (1) Initial adoption of the innovation by end users, beneficiaries or clients with initial benefits/impacts being delivered by the innovation, and (2) Innovation is being used beyond primary users and impacts at scale are apparent.

How IDRC-supported research informed or influenced others

The evaluation included a systematic assessment of outcomes achieved through integrating scaling strategies into IDRC programs, using the scaling pathway (Figure 1) as a framework.

The assessment focused on policy and innovation outcomes, as they relate directly to IDRC's corporate-level scaling indicators and reflect the way many programs reported against the scaling objective in annual progress reports.

The assessment drew on a diverse range of program-level sources[2] (this does not include project documents) including program evaluations, program area progress reports, Trackify, and surveys and interviews with staff and grantees.

An analysis of the two datasets extracted from Trackify, one for each of the corporate-level indicators for scaling, found that while it was a useful source it was not sufficiently reliable and the data required extensive review and cleaning for this assessment of outcomes.

[2] It is important to note that the sources do not cover all core IDRC programs evenly, as not all programs used Trackify and not all programs had evaluations during the strategic period. Only corporate and program level documentation was reviewed. Project level reports such as project completion reports or final technical reports were not within the scope for this evaluation. The findings, therefore, relate to how programs present results relating to scaling and do not take into account grantee perspectives, which may differ.

Innovation and policy outcome examples

Nutritious potatoes in Colombia: innovation outcome

The Expanding Adoption of Nutritious, Disease-Resistant Potatoes in Colombia project, one of 18 Canadian International Food Security Research Fund (CIFSRF) Phase 2 projects, resulted in the development of three new potato varieties with higher yields, more protein, iron and zinc, as well as more blight resistance. The potatoes are estimated to have reached 6.5 million people in Colombia.

The success of this project is attributed to its multipronged strategy, which included the development of a sustainable business model centred on rural entrepreneurs as specialist seed producers. It also included family farming schools, community garden groups and leadership schools for women in 13 municipalities. In addition to scaling access to the potato products themselves, the project's business model is being scaled across the country by a national organisation (Milena Buitrago Rodriguez, 2018; Wiggins *et al.*, 2018).

Sugar tax in South Africa: policy outcome

Through the IDRC-funded project Economic and Health Impacts of Legislative and Fiscal policies to Improve Nutrition in South Africa, researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand worked directly with the National Department of Health in South Africa to provide evidence (published 2013–2015) to develop a sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) taxation law. This project followed previous IDRC policy research projects in Latin America on the same topic and, according to the researchers, the success of that work provided legitimacy and interest for them to take up the issue in South Africa.

In March 2016, at the annual budget speech, the South African Ministry of Finance announced the introduction of the Health Promotion Levy, a tax on SSBs. The levy came into effect in April 2018. The project completion report notes that 'although the Department of Health was already considering such a tax, the evidence and dialogue generated by this project was central to the policy process and outcome'. The taxation rate the South African government adopted was 11%, which was less than the 20% recommended by the project. This was attributed to substantial concessions made to the beverage and sugar industries. To maintain momentum, IDRC funded a follow up project to evaluate the effects of the SSB tax. The evaluation found that announcing and introducing the sugar tax had led to a reduction in the sugar and calorie content and volume of beverage purchases (Stacey *et al.*, 2021).

This example demonstrates how research in one region (initially in Latin America) can provide an entry point for researchers in another region to support policy change. It also demonstrates the possibilities for continued engagement when researchers are funded to evaluate the implementation of policies their research contributed to. This means they are able to look beyond the policy change to the effect of the policy on the lives of citizens.

The evaluation identified 440 outcomes linked to scaling: intermediate outcomes included 32 innovations being used beyond primary intended users and 170 contributions to policy change and implementation.

This is likely to be an underestimate given that the outcome assessment was not exhaustive, did not review all programs to the same extent and drew on sources that were 2–3 years old. Examples of innovations being used beyond primary intended users and contribution to policy change outcomes are highlighted on page 8.

In addition to the 32 innovations being used beyond primary intended users, 53 innovations adopted by end users were also identified and are noteworthy given the advanced potential for scaling at this stage. One example is the solar power pumping stations developed by the Himalayan Adaptation, Water and Resilience project in Pakistan (part of the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) program), which by the end of the pilot had secured agreement from the government to subsidise 30,000 units.[3]

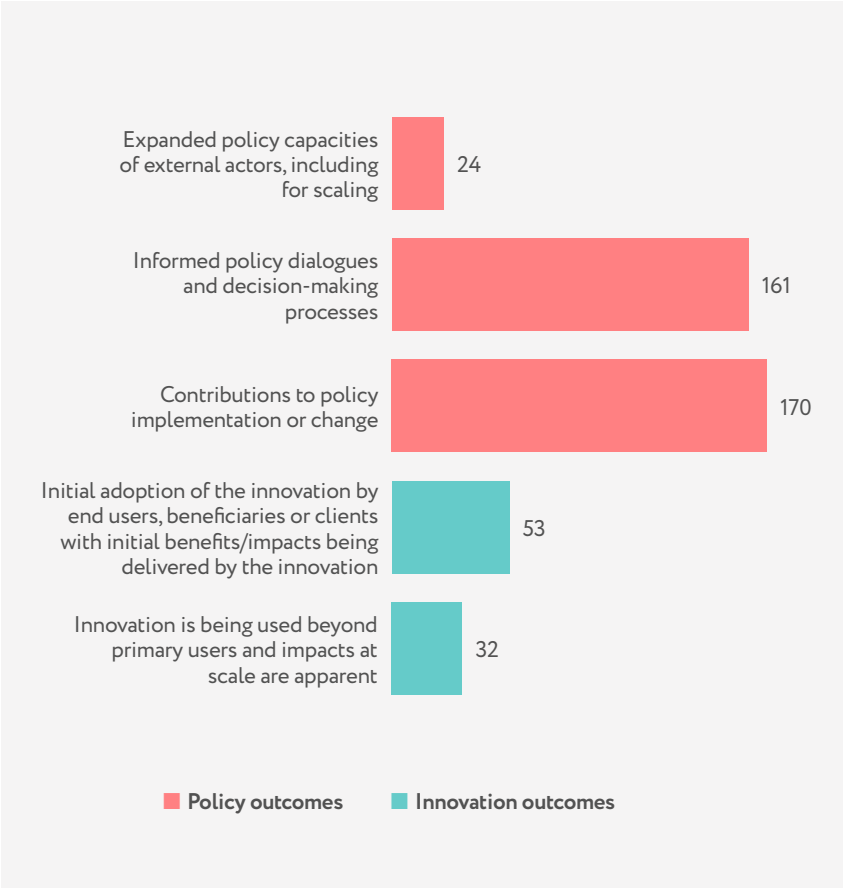


Figure 2: Breakdown of outcomes across the three types of policy and two types of innovation outcomes. Total outcomes n=440.

[3] Lafontaine, A. *et al.* (2019) 'Climate Change Program External Evaluation'.

The relatively low number of policy capacity outcomes (compared with policy change and informing decision-making processes) suggests that programs may not be paying sufficient attention to policy capacity in their monitoring, evaluation and results reporting.

This is likely because of the difficulties in observing capacity outcomes. Policy capacity is important not just as a precursor to policy change but also as a significant outcome in its own right.

Some examples of the 24 policy capacity outcomes identified include the Open and Collaborative Science in Development Network's work to create a policy group on Open Science at the Ministry of Science and Technology in Argentina, and the government of Kenya's launch of a research consortium to support Technical and Vocational Education and Training reforms, which was greatly informed by IDRC funded–research and led by IDRC at the government's invitation. These are examples of how IDRC projects support sustainable scaling strategies, which do not yield tangible results at large scale in the project timeline, but strengthen the enabling environment for scaling in the future.

Most of the identified outcomes were documented at a national level as compared to community, municipal/district, sub-national, regional or global level.

This was the case for both innovation and policy outcomes and was consistent across the sources reviewed. Considering that senior staff interviewees said that one of the reasons for introducing the scaling objective was to shift the focus of programs from local levels to larger populations, from that perspective, a high number of outcomes achieved at the national level suggests that the scaling objective achieved this intent. The lower number of regional or global level outcomes is to be expected as there tend to be fewer opportunities for influence at this level, building on national level outcomes.

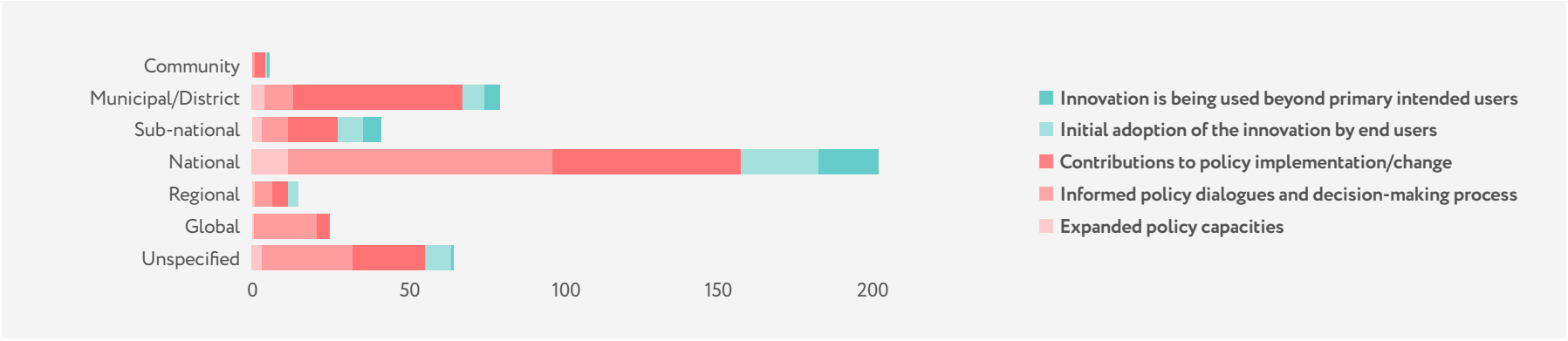


Figure 3: Outcomes by geographic level (n=440)

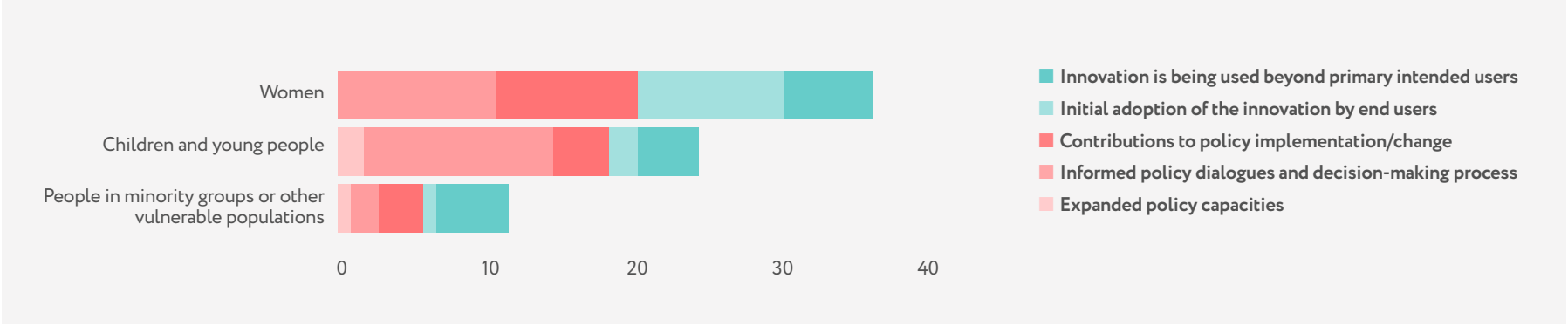
The most frequently reported beneficiary group was women (37 outcomes), followed by children and young people (25 outcomes) and then minority groups and other vulnerable populations (12).

In order to assess the equity and sustainability of outcomes, the evaluation tried to determine the intended beneficiary group for each of the outcomes identified (see Figure 4). By beneficiary group, we mean the people whose lives are intended to be improved as a result of the outcome. Overall, it was possible to determine the beneficiary group in only 17% (74 of 440) of identified outcomes. Looking at the type of outcomes shows a big difference; it was possible to determine the beneficiary group in 47% of innovation outcomes compared to 10% of policy outcomes.

There is an opportunity for programs to gain more understanding of the potential benefits and risks of the policy changes and innovations they are supporting.

The key finding from our analysis is that the way outcomes are reported in evaluations, program reports or Trackify is often disconnected from the outcome context. This is particularly a challenge with how policy change is reported, which often does not include an indication of why the policy matters and whom it matters for. Consideration of the effects of policy change is particularly important for scaling when the risk of unintended (negative) impact is higher and trade-offs have to be negotiated. One explanation for this is that the corporate indicators for the scaling objective, which directly shaped the Trackify data and indirectly influenced the other sources, led to an emphasis on scaling up. The indicators were not designed to track changes in the quality of impact – variety, sustainability, or equity, for example – so there was less of an incentive for programs to report in this way.

Figure 4: Outcomes by intended beneficiary group (n=74)



Outcomes: Changes within IDRC

The strategic objective to scale contributed to a stronger shared purpose and collaboration among program staff and projects.

The strategic objective required program staff to consider how they can contribute to scaling research results, creating a stronger shared purpose around which program staff and the projects they support can identify and mobilise. Several interviewees told the evaluation team that the strategic objective led to stronger collaboration within programs and fewer isolated projects pursuing discrete aims.

Programs have paid more attention to collaboration and partnerships with more diverse actors, such as the private sector, advocacy groups, governments and other funders.

This is an important outcome that shows progress towards IDRC's commitment to 'be working with public and private sector actors who can advance ideas and innovation' as stated in the Centre's 2015–2020 Strategic Plan. One example provided by a staff interviewee was IDRC's work around open data, which started as a series of bottom-up research projects focusing on national policy. At the time that the strategic objective to scale was being implemented, they had the opportunity to leverage that research for influence at the global level by working with the World Bank and a network of donors and implementing agencies.

The strategic objective to scale contributed to changed mindsets of staff, triggering discussions at project, program and corporate levels on what scaling means, how to pursue it and how to measure it.

While pursuing development outcomes is not new for IDRC, doing so through scaling as an explicit strategy is new, and, according to senior staff, it has required a change in culture.

Discussions at project, program and corporate levels on what scaling means, how to pursue it and how to measure it raised staff awareness around scaling and is beginning to shift mindsets of program staff. For example, the scaling objective has prompted programs to think about impact differently; scaling has added a dimension to the existing paradigm of research uptake; program staff are also shifting their ambitions and re-positioning their spheres of influence to consider how they can support scaling of research results.

Likewise, interviewees suggested that learning in this strategic period shifted thinking on when to integrate planning for scaling into programs; it is now recommended that scaling research results should be considered when designing research. A good illustration of this in application was the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX). Scaling was fundamental in the design of KIX, with grantees supported to develop approaches to scaling innovations from the outset as well as to learn about scaling in their own contexts.

03. Lessons and considerations

Based on our evidence and findings, the evaluation team consolidated the following learning and considerations for IDRC to help build on its strengths and address the challenges identified in the evaluation findings.

Lessons and considerations are grouped into two categories:

- **Considerations in programming**
- **Corporate and cross-program considerations**

Engaging with more diverse actors

The evaluation found that the strategic objective to scale encouraged IDRC staff to approach coordination differently than they had in the past. Most notably, programs with intentions to scale were engaging more with stakeholders beyond the research community (such as private sector, policymakers or civil society) – both as external stakeholders and as program partners.

For example, the Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa (IMCHA) initiative was created with regional multi-disciplinary health policy research organisations that connected researchers and government decisionmakers. Another example is from the Scaling up the Production and Distribution of Double-fortified Salt in India project that worked with the private sector to distribute the double-fortified salt to more than 50 million people in three Indian states.

Coordination of diverse stakeholders is challenging. Productive partnerships need to be nurtured and require careful thought to maximise the value and minimise complications.

Consideration:

How are the various coordination roles, both internally across grantees and externally with other stakeholders, best filled and by whom to support scaling?

Positioning investments to achieve impact at optimal scale

Scaling research results takes time; the findings from this evaluation suggest that the whole process of scaling research results for impact at optimal scale could be 10–15 years, if not longer, depending on the maturity of the research field.

This means a long-term perspective is important for IDRC investment decisions, as is taking into consideration what is realistic to achieve within the program timeframe, and what needs to be set up for sustaining scaling efforts beyond the initial investment.

Some of the strategies that IDRC programs used to provide more time for research results to scale were:

- Building longer programs – programs looked at in the evaluation tended to be 7+ years.
- Introducing multi-phase programs in which projects that showed promising results were continued in a second phase – for example CIFSRF, Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) and Livestock Vaccine Innovation Fund (LVIF) all took a phased approach, and CARIAA asked evaluators to identify projects that could benefit from additional investment to take outcomes and impact further.
- Using strategic partnerships with other funders to support projects and secure follow up funding, or to build new programs that build on previous results – such as the Climate and Resilience program being designed with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to build on lessons and support a series of projects stemming from the previous CARIAA and Climate Change Adaption in Africa (CCAA) programs to follow through on potential for scaling results and promoting uptake.

Considerations:

Across IDRC program portfolios, what is the right balance for supporting longer-term investments, multi-phase projects and strengthening strategic partnerships, specifically with a view to scaling research results?

Are there other ways that the Centre can support programs to 'position themselves' to achieve impact at optimal scale, even if scaling impact beyond primary intended users is expected to take place after the end of the IDRC-funded project or program's lifetime?

Maximising a portfolio approach for scaling

Achieving impact at optimal scale requires investment in both the supply and demand side of the scaling pathway simultaneously. In other words, achieving impact at optimal scale requires strengthening the demand for the knowledge or innovation at the same time as developing the new knowledge or innovation. An example of this cited by one interviewee was that of Rwanda, where a new bovine vaccine could not be scaled because there were only two veterinary scientists in the country who were able to administer the vaccine.

Some IDRC programs were learning that the portfolio of projects within programs can be used strategically to support both the supply and demand sides —this was most prominent in programs working on field building. Two IDRC staff survey respondents mentioned LVIF as a good example, with one highlighting that the program is '... developing an interesting innovation pipeline/ecosystem (with funds to support project teams in delivering innovations)'.

The evaluation found that there is an opportunity for more targeted efforts to ensure the demand for scaling is driven by considerations of gender, diversity and inclusion in scaling processes. It is essential to consider who gets to defines optimal scale and the possible negative effects of scaling for specific groups, including those who are marginalised or vulnerable.

'Field building is often spoken about as the left-hand side of the pipeline [scaling pathway], but we don't build the other side that is going to take our research and take our ideas. We are doing a lot of product development, but we are really looking at the two big valleys of death – developing the product and delivering the product – and there is field building to be done on both sides'. (Interview, IDRC staff)

Consideration:

Can a portfolio approach be more strategically used to build eco-systems for equitable scaling by investing in projects, across a portfolio, that support both knowledge and innovation supply and demand solutions?

Leveraging flexible funding mechanisms

The evaluation team heard from staff that flexible funding was one of the main ways they felt they were able to support scaling by enabling grantees to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Flexible funding mechanisms used to support scaling include **synergy** and **opportunity funds** for grantees to build on existing work or to take advantage of emerging opportunities to scale, and **rapid response funding** that allowed researchers to respond to policymaker requests. For example, in the IMCHA initiative, synergy grants allowed selected research teams to expand the scope and depth of their work. And in CARIAA, synergy and opportunity funds were built into the program design and used to take advantage of policy windows.

However, flexible funding to support scaling was also identified as a challenge in the staff survey, suggesting that not all staff are equally aware of the tools available and how they can be used.

Considerations:

Should IDRC leverage flexible funding mechanisms more systematically across programs to scale research results?

Could formal criteria and processes be beneficial to promote flexible funding and support a more consistent understanding across the Centre of the flexible funding options that can be used to support scaling?

Resourcing knowledge synthesis with a focus on scaling

Research synthesis was cited by IDRC staff as a particularly valuable, but sometimes under-resourced, tool for scaling. Synthesis papers were considered as helping to identify gaps and opportunities to scale impact, as well as helping to build a critical mass of knowledge from disparate research. Insights generated by synthesis can also help inform investment decisions, such as whether to support a second phase of a project or program, where to invest along the scaling pathway, or whether to invest in a new or different research area.

In one example, the GrOW program used synthesis for scaling research results and to inform the investment decision for GrOW 2 with a more targeted research agenda and a view to scaling. The final GrOW report highlights that synthesis enabled them to identify key lessons and challenges to inform policy, program design and monitoring measures.

One of the challenges to using research synthesis more consistently in scaling efforts at IDRC was variable capacity and incentives among program staff to do synthesis work. The GrOW program had a specialised program officer position that focused on knowledge translation. IDRC has since established a knowledge translation team within its Policy and Evaluation team to support programs and increase the capacity to engage more strategically through synthesis.

Considerations:

Could IDRC provide more time and resource, both at the corporate level and within programs, for knowledge synthesis work with a focus on scaling?

What is the most appropriate level of emphasis for knowledge synthesis at the corporate, program and grantee levels, and how can these activities be effectively coordinated for enhanced influence and impact?

Evolving staff capacities to support grantees to scale research results

The grantees we spoke to in interviews were overall very appreciative of IDRC's 'hands on' support to them in scaling results throughout their projects. One grantee said IDRC was 'more than a funding agency, they were part of the team'.

Scaling has required program staff to think and act more strategically and opportunistically. Their role is expanding from that of funder and technical partner to also being a knowledge broker, knowledge translator, coordinator and strategic thinker. However, there is not yet a formal recognition of this change in role and some responsible officers feel that they do not have sufficient time, resources or incentives to carry it out effectively.

Considerations:

What additional support is required to facilitate program staff to support grantees and programs to achieve impact at optimal scale?

What are the potential gaps in skills, knowledge or capacity within programs and how can they best be met?

'… if the ambition is impact at scale and projects working at multiple scales simultaneously then program officers need to work completely differently – they play more of a relationship management role, they are knowledge brokers and putting in early warning systems for conflict'. (Interview, IDRC staff)

Considering gender and equity in scaling

The evaluation found that staff were engaging in scaling discussions with grantees early in the research process, encouraging them to think about different factors related to scaling, and this practice should continue.

Ongoing and evolving conversations about how to integrate the scaling principles into the research and scaling process will be important for designing and implementing inclusive scaling processes that promote equitable outcomes. Consideration of optimal scale and the potential negative effects of scaling in particular have been identified as areas needing improved support in this regard.

With regard to gender and equity in scaling, we found that given the significant effort at IDRC to more systematically mainstream gender considerations in its research projects, gender was an important consideration in IDRC research that is positioned to scale. However, discussions about how scaling itself may affect equity and gender were less prevalent.

The Scaling Science initiative's guiding principles for scaling impact – in particular the guiding principles of justification and optimal scale – provide a lens for thinking about how to integrate gender equality into scaling strategies. Grantees would benefit from having more discussions about this with IDRC when considering scaling processes. However, the evaluation found that staff found it challenging to clearly articulate specific gender considerations within scaling processes that would be necessary to strengthen the gender and equity outcomes of scaling interventions.

Consideration:

What additional support is required for responsible officers to facilitate more nuanced discussions with and among grantees about optimal scale and the potential negative effects of scaling (particularly with regards to gender and equity) throughout the research process in a way that encourages responsible scaling and equitable outcomes?

Conceptualising scaling

Having a broad and diverse conceptualisation of scaling has enabled experimentation and adaptation in individual programs, while also making it difficult to collectively learn about scaling across the Centre and with grantees. Opinion among IDRC staff is mixed on whether it would be helpful to have a standard approach to scaling. However, a unified *conceptual* understanding or definition of what is meant by scaling, scaling impact and optimal scale, could, for example, make it easier to identify common objectives and facilitate cooperation and learning among the multiple actors involved in scaling efforts.

According to several IDRC staff interviewees, the Scaling Science initiative – which draws on IDRC's program and grantee experience – has been one of the most important initiatives for developing the Centre's understanding of scaling. Externally, IDRC has also been recognised by other funders in the scaling community for this work – and in particular IDRC's principled approach to scaling. For example, lessons from the Scaling Science initiative were used by the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre, to inform the development of practical tools for project selection, monitoring and development of scaling potential.[4]

The evaluation team believes that the Scaling Science study developed a useful framework in identifying guiding principles for scaling in a responsible way, while leaving space for different scaling strategies depending on the specific program or project context. However, the evaluation found that there is still some confusion and diversity in understanding of scaling at IDRC, suggesting that further work is needed to socialise the Scaling Science work across the Centre.

Considerations:

Could a more unified approach to understanding scaling of research results benefit IDRC?

Should the Centre provide enhanced support for staff and grantees to better understand and use the concepts introduced in the Scaling Science work?

To what extent and in what ways should IDRC continue to, or even strengthen, its influence on the evolving debates and dialogue in the scaling field?

[4] IDRC Performance and Learning Report 2018–2019

Learning from grantees and colleagues

Learning about scaling in IDRC tends to happen mostly within programs, suggesting that for IDRC staff, scaling is an applied concept that they are learning about through their practice and, most importantly, with grantees.

Program meetings and workshops with grantees, as well as one-to-one discussions, are particularly fruitful spaces for learning about scaling, alongside systematic learning reviews and synthesis papers – particularly for externally funded programs.

The most pressing challenge to learning faced by IDRC staff is time. Some teams were able to create formal space to learn about scaling, but often learning got squeezed out for other corporate priorities. To encourage learning, the Centre and its programs could continue to encourage both formal and informal learning spaces and ensure that time and resources are set aside to promote learning.

Consideration:

In what ways can IDRC's upcoming learning agenda facilitate learning about cross-cutting issues such as scaling?

Given that scaling involves higher levels of risk in programming, how can the Centre enable conversations about the challenges and failures in scaling, and whether or not a project could or should scale?

Strengthening monitoring, evaluation and reporting on scaling

Scaling can be difficult to define, and therein difficult to integrate into monitoring, evaluation and reporting efforts in a meaningful way. Monitoring, evaluating and reporting on scaling presented challenges for IDRC. The Centre introduced two high-level organisational indicators to track progress against the scaling objective: the number of innovations being widely used and adopted, and the number of new policies implemented or changed. Data reported against these indicators took a significant amount of cleaning and organising for the evaluation team to get meaningful results for analysis. To improve the quality of monitoring and the usefulness of reporting scaling outcomes, IDRC could incorporate a greater emphasis on the significance of outcomes, explaining why the outcome matters and who it matters for.

Within programs, evaluations reported on results of scaling in varied ways. Some programs adapted their approach to accommodate evaluation questions about scaling. CARIAA took a staged approach to evaluation, which was perceived to have supported scaling by allowing them to develop learning questions throughout implementation. CIFSRF commissioned an evaluation to assess its contribution to food security, which assessed each project in terms of the prospects for scaling.

Many of the evaluation reports we reviewed concluded that it was too early to assess development outcomes or impact at scale in the final phase of the program. We found that, particularly for programs seeking to scale impact through policy, there is a clear challenge in understanding the potential impact of policy change and that policy outcomes tended to be assessed in a way that was disconnected from their context – emphasising how important it is to clearly document why the policy matters and for whom it matters.

Considerations:

How can IDRC's scaling of outcomes and contribution to impact at scale be tracked and assessed in a more systematic and reliable way?

To what extent is it feasible and appropriate to expand the scope of program monitoring and evaluation to better examine the significance of outcomes and incorporate more analysis of the potential benefits and risks of impact?

04. Conclusion

This evaluation set out to assess how well IDRC met its 2015–2020 strategic objective to 'invest in knowledge and innovation for large-scale positive change' and what could be learned from this experience to inform the implementation of the next strategic plan.

The evaluation characterised IDRC's experience as a scaling journey, reflecting how the practice of scaling across the Centre developed over the strategic period. Yet the Centre began its exploration of scaling prior to the introduction of the scaling objective and continues this journey into the next strategic period.

Along this journey, based on the experience of its staff and grantees across the global South, IDRC has developed a more nuanced understanding of scaling than was set out in the strategic objective ('to invest in large-scale positive change'). The resulting principled approach to scaling that emerged during the strategic period has made an important contribution to debates on equitable and responsible scaling.

This evaluation has brought to the surface imporant learning about the practices, systems and processes that supported or hindered scaling across the Centre. It presents considerations for IDRC and other funders and researchers as they continue their journey to scale the impact of research results for the public good. We hope the evaluation makes a fresh and useful contribution to the emerging science of scaling.

Read the full evaluation report:

bit.ly/IDRCscalingevaluation

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